

Mr. Oppenheimer and "Them"

RANDOLPH VIGNE

"A CONDITION IS A THING upon the fulfilment of which depends another," says the *Concise*. In the 1962 T. B. Davie Memorial Lecture to the University of Cape Town, Mr. Harry Oppenheimer dealt with such conditions—the things that need to be fulfilled to bring about "progress in Africa."

He made it his business to define these conditions, and I make due apology for this crude summary of a detailed argument. Thus Mr. Oppenheimer:

1. Colonialism brought about Africa's spectacular progress.

2. For this progress to continue European colonialism must be restored but without its political content.

3. To restore the conditions of colonialism Africa needs:

(a) stable, efficient government with individual freedom, run by an educated, Europeanised elite, since "one man one vote" is incompatible with parliamentary democracy in Africa and is likely to lead to civil war, chaos or dictatorship.

(b) investment capital, markets and skilled men from outside Africa, and from Europe rather than the United States or Russia.

Leaving aside the argument as to whether European colonialism was the good thing of Mr. Oppenheimer's rather dumpish description or not, one may summarise his conclusion thus: Without European economic influence and a European political system run by a Europeanised elite Africa will "sink back into the chaos and tyranny from which the Europeans rescued it."

TO HAVE DEFINED SUCH conditions for African progress, Mr. Oppenheimer is either a deeply pessimistic person who has written off the future of Africa and presumably his companies' two-thousand-million rand stake with it, or he is very seriously misinformed. For to have defined conditions as utterly impossible of fulfilment as those listed in the Davie Lecture, Mr. Oppenheimer must either be telling us that "universal darkness" (his phrase) will return to Africa, or he is unaware that the conditions are unfulfillable.

The evidence suggests the second alternative. Mr. Oppenheimer and his father, the late Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, were once men of great political power, and Mr. Oppenheimer still talks with the vocabulary of a power that is gone. The isolation that once accompanied it has remained, however, and keeps Mr. Oppenheimer away from the realities of post-colonial Africa.

In his isolation Mr. Oppenheimer appears to have

lost touch with important realities of the new Africa. In the first place, were he fully in touch he would not prescribe conditions that overrule Africa's inevitable reaction against European control. And these conditions are given at a time when the chances of African acceptance of European economic, if not political, control are almost nonexistent. In the second place, he would not require the halting of the transfer of political power from the hands of elites to the mass. One-man-one-vote he calls "a dangerous and undesirable course" likely to end individual freedom, which he claims as one of colonialism's greatest contributions to Africa and a prerequisite for progress if men are "to realise their potentialities." It is, of course, the very denial of such freedom under Colonialism which has made "one man one vote" inevitable everywhere in Africa.

But the atmosphere of unreality extends beyond the actual conditions listed. It is difficult to analyse as it pervades the entire lecture, but a clue is provided by Mr. Oppenheimer's use of language in certain passages. When he was younger, there was meaning in the pronouns 'you' and 'them' in sentences like: "Whether you are dealing with the transfer of power to Africans in a Colonial area or the admission of Africans to power in a mixed racial area, the best hope lies in building up and rapidly expanding a class of educated Westernised Africans and of co-operating with them." 'You' were the rulers, heirs of Queen Victoria's Colonial Office, of Mr. Rhodes, and General Smuts; 'them' were the Natives among whom you had come to make your fortune, perhaps to settle, and whom it was your duty to govern.

"You" were in the position that Dr. Verwoerd is in *vis à vis* the Transkei, where the Republican Government "in its new role of Colonial power" . . . "has greater knowledge and experience of Africans and disposes of greater power on the spot than the old Colonial powers." Dr. Verwoerd can introduce new constitutions, can create elites, can bolster up the traditionalists, influence the Transkei's economy, whereas neither Mr. Oppenheimer nor any of his fellow industrialists, his Progressive Party or former United Party colleagues can do any of these things.

Lest it be thought that this passage was merely a lapse, a hearkening back to pre-1948 days of glory, the point should be made that the conditions as a whole imply the possession of power to enforce their fulfilment. There is a pervading tone of "we must see to it that" Africa goes this way or that. Mr. Oppenheimer may be genuinely unaware of the absurdity of his expecting these conditions to be carried out as voluntary actions by African states or by the people of Southern Africa in the future. If he is not, he implies the existence of some power in his own hands or in the hands of the learned dons, city fathers and students he addressed, or his wider audience among the whites of Southern Africa, to see to it that the Africans keep Africa on the road of progress.

Mr. Oppenheimer himself is without any such power to enforce anything against the wishes of African people. This is so largely because his views are unacceptable either to the mass of Africans or the mass of whites. He heads a mighty industry which is a symbol to millions of Africans of white wealth at the expense

of African toil. His public image, reinforced by this Davie lecture, links him with Welensky, Salazar and, yes, Verwoerd in African minds. Perhaps African antipathy to him is simply a response to his own consistent attitude to the people of this continent, and hence to the majority of his fellow countrymen in South Africa, with whose feelings and aspirations by no gesture or word does he ever identify himself. Here once again, in comparing Dr. Verwoerd's Transkei colony-to-be with Europe's former African colonies, he says, with ominous inevitability, "it will be interesting to see if we in South Africa can do better."

As for the whites of Southern Africa, the huge majority do not believe in his ability to protect them from physical danger or economic loss should his Progressive Party policies be put to the test. They simply do not share his views and therefore will never attempt to enforce conditions involving risks to their own security.

THERE IS, NEVERTHELESS, a clear indication in one passage that Mr. Oppenheimer is aware, if only momentarily, of the antipathy felt towards his views, and the improbability of their ever being of real influence. Thus, when making the concrete proposal of "limiting the vote to people . . . sufficiently educated and sophisticated to work a parliamentary system" he concedes, indirectly, that it may be "unacceptable to Africans and therefore bound to fail."

It may be unacceptable, note, Mr. Oppenheimer does not accept that it will be unacceptable—after all, he says plaintively, "it has never been seriously tried."

He makes no concessions to sentiment, except in defence of white attitudes here and there, and he makes no gesture towards modern African ideals of non-racialism, panAfricanism or nonalignment. He seems quite unaware of the modern African ethos, with its memories of—I mention these at random—the slave trade, Congo "red rubber," genocide against the Herero, the rape of Matabeleland, betrayal by the Act of Union, or four centuries of Portuguese rule. And the Colour Bar, that universal experience of African people in contact with Europeans, was, in Mr. Oppenheimer's view "for many years not in serious conflict with African aspirations and capabilities." Has he no inkling of the depth of anti-white, anti-European feeling that Colonialism and the Colour Bar (nowhere more strictly enforced than in his own industry), have created among the African people?

As for the work of scholars and thinkers in seeking an understanding of the nonmechanical contribution African characteristics may make towards the sick materialism of Western Civilisation—why, Mr. Oppenheimer does not even know of its existence.

Instead his argument is all the tough talk of big business. Africa wants and can give much more than that, and any discussion of conditions that ignores the true springs of African nationalism, for want of a better phrase, contributes as little towards finding the way of African progress as does the prescribing of a course one lacks the power to see carried out.

MR. OPPENHEIMER MUST LEARN that the road pointing to European "neocolonialism" is the wrong one, and the traveller who urges it on others will be rightly dis-

credited. The road laid out and paved by white men who see their role as one of "dealing with" Africans and "building up" classes of educated Africans for their own ends, is going to be by-passed by leaders of African opinion, who will rather travel a rougher route than accept Mr. Oppenheimer's patronage.

He must learn that if "one man one vote" is in fact incompatible with a two-or-more-party system in African states, and would require the whites to "hand over unconditionally" to the Africans in Southern Africa, the best course is to prepare for such eventualities. If, as he must know, there is not the will for

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“genuine racial partnership” in these countries, why not face up to it and work out what the conditions are for progress in a nonracial yet African-controlled Southern Africa? It is the “big push” from the ordinary people of Africa that is going to be needed to make Africa what she can become, not the building up of Europeanised elites, or closer economic ties with Europe.

Before hearing the Davie lecture one may have thought that Mr. Oppenheimer had a personal part to

play in assisting and canalising Africa’s “big push” if only because he once resigned from the United Party and is known to support the Progressives. It might even have been possible to see for him a progressive role in the agony of South Africa’s emergence from European domination. On the evidence of the lecture there can be no such hope. Instead of being a potential force for progress in Africa, Mr. Oppenheimer is only to be seen as an obstacle to it. ●

Ibrahim el Salahi

ULLI BEIER

IBRAHIM EL SALAHİ IS A YOUNG Sudanese artist who is now a teacher in the Khartoum Technical Institute. Salahi was trained at the Slade School in London, but it is evident from his present work that he has developed far since then. He seems to have developed his highly original forms from Arabic calligraphy. Some of his works are abstract compositions based on Arabic writing. Most of his work is figurative, the basic Arab forms being still recognisable and some of the exquisite rhythm of this writing has been preserved.

In content, however, Salahi’s art has grown beyond both the influences of the Slade and Arabic writing.

Salahi presents us with a series of anthropomorph images which are extremely haunting. These images are human in their suffering—but the forms seem to suggest human, divine and animal elements all at once. As in ancient African mytho-

logy there are no clear-cut divisions between the animal, the human and the divine.

The strong *African* feeling in these pictures is surprising—coming as it does from Khartoum, from an Islamic culture with no tradition in figurative painting. Yet it is so strong, that one thinks at first one recognises resemblances between Salahi’s images and African masks. Senufo? Dan?—No. A closer look reveals that it is an affinity of spirit rather than of form. These images—like masks—are appearances from another, supernatural or superreal world. We regard them with a mixture of awe and delight, trying to interpret the cryptic message they carry.

In November-December 1961, MBARI exhibited a small collection of Ibrahim el Salahi’s drawings, one of which is reproduced below.

